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# Panama charges an 'open secret'

## Guns, drugs, murder are reported

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News reports on Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, Panama's military strongman, were no surprise, two experts on Latin America said Thursday.

An NBC broadcast and a lengthy *New York Times* report discussed whether he was connected to a political murder, drug trafficking and gun-running to leftist guerrillas.

"All of this has long been an open secret in Central America," said Ron McDonald of Syracuse University. "In fact, this is only the tip of the iceberg."

Noriega was in the USA Thursday and could not be reached for comment. But in previous interviews he's called such statements lies circulated by political enemies.

Discussed in the reports:

■ Whether he sold secrets to Cuba while reporting Cuban and Nicaraguan intelligence to the United States

■ The murder of govern-

ment critic Hugo Spadafora. His decapitated body was found in 1985 in Costa Rica near Panama — unleashing a major political scandal.

Noriega is "is in deep trouble," said Richard Millett of Southern Illinois University. "The Spadafora case just won't go away."

Noriega's opponents say the Reagan administration tolerates him because U.S. national security interests are at stake in his strategic nation, site of the Panama Canal.

Almost 10,000 U.S. troops are based there — in a spot handy for U.S. oversight of troubled Latin America.

Secretary of State George Shultz said Thursday the activities attributed to Noriega "are obviously of concern to us."

But Millett, who called Noriega "el hombre" (THE man) in Panama, said it would "not be fair and prudent to suspect that all problems in Panama are the work of one man. It's an institutional problem."